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# Because it's real difficult in life: Annie Hall and the Theatrical Imagination

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**“...Because it’s real difficult in life”: *Annie Hall* and the Theatrical Imagination**  
**By Walter Metz**  
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## **Introduction**

Throughout his film, *Mighty Aphrodite* (1996), Woody Allen cuts back and forth between a stage containing an ancient Greek Chorus and the story of Lenny Winerib, a character searching for information about his adopted son’s birth parents.<sup>i</sup> The prominence given to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, the dramatic source of the film, raises interesting questions about the importance of the theatrical to other Allen films. How are Allen’s roots in live theatre—he was a Broadway playwright from the late 1960s through the mid-1990s—germane to an analysis of his film work?<sup>ii</sup> Is there anything theatrical about Allen’s masterful works of cinema, such as *Annie Hall* (1977)?

This paper proposes that the theatre scenes in *Mighty Aphrodite* merely literalize the theatrical influences circulating in Allen’s film work since the 1970s. Crucially, *Annie Hall*—Allen’s first “serious” art film—ends with the reconstruction of its narrative into a stage play.<sup>iii</sup> Having just broken up with Annie (Diane Keaton) in Los Angeles, Alvy (Woody Allen) returns to New York to write his first play. A shock cut from the scene in Los Angeles throws us, without warning, into a rehearsal for the play in which the two characters representing Alvy and Annie utter much of the dialogue we have heard them exchange throughout the film. Thus, Alvy has followed that pithy aphorism doled out by writing teachers trying to make a quick buck, “write what you know,” except of course in Alvy’s theatrical version, he and Annie stay together. In direct address to the camera, Alvy explains, “What do you want? It was my first play. You know how you’re always trying to get things to come out perfect in art because it’s real difficult in life.”

Peter Cowie further layers the theatrical intertextuality of this scene: “Like Strindberg, who hissed at his critics that he would see them in his next play, Alvy writes a drama that, when rehearsed in Manhattan, contains most of the same lines as he and Annie exchange at the health restaurant on Sunset Blvd” (44). This connection seems logical enough: Cowie defines Alvy, a playwright, via a theatrical referent, August Strindberg. Considering Alvy as a stand-in for Woody Allen the film auteur, Cowie’s connection superficially reinforces Allen as the cinematic heir to Ingmar Bergman, himself the Scandinavian cinematic equivalent to Strindberg as dramatist. However, given that the ultimate form of Alvy’s artistic expression is the theatre, not the cinema, despite his penchant for Bergman films and *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1971), I believe it is imperative that we consider the theatrical as an important signifier in itself, not just as an intermediary art form that leads us toward the cinema.

Mary Nichols favorably analyzes the use of the theatrical to override the cinematic in considering this crucial penultimate scene in *Annie Hall*: “He writes his first play—a dramatization of his and Annie’s relationship. His art does not reproduce reality exactly, however, for in the play Annie returns with him from L.A. to New York City. Alvy apologizes to the audience... But Allen’s movie is not like this, for it does not have the Hollywood ending of Alvy’s play” (45). In this way, *Annie Hall* can have it both ways, attracting both a spectator wanting to see things work out well—Alvy becomes a successful playwright and Annie is now empowered enough to teach her new boyfriend what she has learned from Alvy—while also attracting an audience interested in exploring the bitter nature of alienated modernity.

The film has two endings, one a happy ending Hollywood romantic coupling, and the other, a bittersweet international art film dissolution of a relationship. That the latter is expressed cinematically, and the former theatrically, is of crucial importance for understanding the theatrical as it pertains to *Annie Hall* in particular and the films of Woody Allen in general. I propose that the theatre in Allen's cinema has come to represent a dead space of wish fulfillment and self-deception, whereas the cinematic has come to serve as a place of clear sight and liberation.

The double-ending of *Annie Hall* has been most profitably analyzed by Thomas Schatz, in his exploration of the film as a post-modern text, combining classical textual features (the parting of the lovers on the streets of New York to end the film) and modernist ones (the juxtaposition of two levels of narrative, the theatrical space of the play explicitly contrasted with the seemingly more real space of the street). Schatz furthers Nichols' view of the two endings via an analysis of the aesthetic and narrative features of the film, producing an argument that *Annie Hall* is a post-modern film in that it is both classically conservative, and radically modernist:

Alvie [sic] Singer's first play, perhaps, but also Woody Allen's current film. Once again, and with abrupt finality, the ironic interfacing of author, narrator, and character ruptures the enclosed world of the narrative and this time casts the entire conceptual basis for the story into ambiguity. Are we to assume that the author/narrator (i.e., Woody Allen the filmmaker) is any less manipulative for the fake of dramatic effect than is Alvie the playwright? Apparently not, which renders the status of the entire "autobiographical" reverie unreliable and ambiguous.... So while *Annie Hall* represents one of the more extreme examples of modernist technique in a popular Hollywood movie, the audience's general familiarity with the Woody Allen persona and the logic of standup comedy routine tempers that modernism and renders it easily accessible to the majority of viewers. (231)

In Schatz's reading, *Annie Hall* becomes about the artist's retreat from real life into a theatrical world in which the male artist has control over his female characters. Such a

feminist critique of *Annie Hall* indicates Allen's films' blurring of real and fictional stories—made creepy after the Soon-Yi Previn scandal, especially in *Husbands and Wives* (1992)—has in fact been a characteristic part of his gendered cinematic vision all along.

This specific reading of *Annie Hall*'s theatrical features will allow for a developmental exploration of the relationship between Allen's plays and films. For example, the theatrical meta-textuality of *Mighty Aphrodite* is a characteristic feature of Allen's specifically theatrical work from the 1970s. His play, *God* (1975), is set in 500 B.C. in Athens, and concerns an actor and a writer named Diabetes and Hepatitis, respectively, who attempt to understand the meaning of life, à la Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot* (1948). *Mighty Aphrodite* thus represents, in the overall development of Allen's career, a kind of hybridization between the theatrical parody of the theatre in the guise of *God* and the international art cinema identity concerns of *Annie Hall*. Subsequent to these works would come more plays (1982's *The Floating Light Bulb*), more aggressive films about the theatrical tradition (1982's *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*), and more feminist-inflected cinema-theatre hybridizations along the line of *Annie Hall*.

### **The Theatrical and the Cinematic in the Films of Woody Allen**

Relationships between the theatrical and the cinematic take one of two major forms. First, there are direct references to plays within the film text, meant to invoke a specific theme, mood, or attitude. In the midst of hundreds of other cultural references, *Annie Hall* makes a number of gestures to theatre history. In his BFI monograph on the film,

Peter Cowie lists some fifty such cultural references, some of which have to do with the theatrical.

At the beginning of the film, in the famous tracking shot on the streets of New York, Alvy explains to Rob (Tony Roberts) that a sales clerk's suggestion that he consider their sale on the operas of Wagner is an act of anti-Semitism. Later, Alvy's second wife, Robin (Janet Margolin), explaining why she no longer wants to have sex with Alvy says that her headache is "like Oswald in *Ghosts*." Towards the end of the film, while telling people on the street how much he misses Annie, Alvy responds to a query as to whether he is jealous: "a little bit like Medea." Finally, when Alvy tries to convince Rob to leave Los Angeles and return to New York, because he should be doing Shakespeare in the Park instead of mind-numbing television sitcoms, Max responds by saying that he did Shakespeare in the Park, the only result of which was that he got mugged and someone stole his leotard. In all these cases, the reference to the theatre sets up a joke line that, like many of the other cultural references in the film, is not pursued any further.

A second, more nuanced and critically productive relationship between film and theatre revolves around intertextual linkages between films and plays that explore similar aesthetic, narrative, and ideological terrain. Of all modern American filmmakers, Woody Allen has perhaps most profitably explored such intertextual linkages between the cinema and the theatre. *A Midsummer's Night Sex Comedy* attempts a radical film adaptation of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, applying Shakespeare's plot structure to a turn of the century meditation on technology and modernity.

*Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) engages in a reworking of Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1901), the project of which is all the more fascinating in intertextual contrast with Wendy Wasserstein's similarly-themed play, *The Sisters Rosensweig* (1992). In this intertextual triangle, we have two modern Jewish artists, Wasserstein and Allen, applying Chekhov's plot structure of three different women's relationship with men, and simultaneously to a study of contemporary urban life, one from a male and the other from a female perspective. As a third example, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) reworks Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922), exploring the nexus of power between real-life actors and fictional characters.

However, it is *Mighty Aphrodite* that continues to represent the most complex use of theatrical intertextuality in Woody Allen's oeuvre. My reading of this film will serve as a model for how an intertextual method of the film-theatre linkage can become profitable for cultural analysis. To define the model, I will compare *Mighty Aphrodite* to *Oedipus Rex*, revealing how Allen returns to the roots of ancient Greek theatre to build his modern story of reproductive miscommunication and its potentially tragic effects. This will build a model that will in turn allow me to offer a new reading of *Annie Hall* as a radical re-working of George Bernard Shaw's play, *Pygmalion* (1913).<sup>iv</sup>

By referencing ancient Greek drama in *Mighty Aphrodite*, Allen has radically altered the proscenium form of theatre that he previously employed as a referent in such films as *Annie Hall* and *Another Woman* (1988). Instead of this modern theatre, he has chosen a spectacular form of theatre that is much less intimate. Allen speaks very favorably of the impact of such spectacular productions, whose clearest referent today is contemporary sporting events. After all, the ancient Greek theatrical spaces seated

15,000 spectators, a scope only approached in scale by contemporary NBA games. Allen explains his love for sports in very theatrical terms, terms that might have appealed to the ancient Greek love of theatrical drama: “I grew up with a great love of sports as a spectator. So I like sports very much to this day. Very often I lament the fact that the theatre cannot achieve the tension that a good sporting event can achieve. I love many, many sports as a spectator now” (Qtd. In Bjorkman, 83).

*Mighty Aphrodite* relies on the key narrative device of ancient Greek drama, the Chorus, a set of characters used as a transition from one "act" (although they are not usually referred to in this modern manner) to the next. Sometimes this transition is sung (typically referred to as a Choral Ode) and sometimes the transition is a set of poems in which two demi-choruses (half of the Chorus) argues (these are called the Strophe and Antistrophe). The Chorus is typically comprised of fifteen or so actors. The Chorus sometimes has a spokesperson who will directly address one of the characters as the action proceeds. This Chorus-leader is called the Choragos. The Chorus typically represents the Greek citizenry, and usually tries to give characters advice for the good of Greece.

*Mighty Aphrodite* features a Chorus that makes fun of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. After Lenny Winerib (Woody Allen) and his wife discuss adopting a baby at dinner with friends one night, a shock cut takes us to a stage in ancient Greece in which the characters and Chorus from *Oedipus Rex* discuss the Winerib's dilemma. Jocasta (Olympia Dukakis) laments her plight: “My son did slay unwittingly my noble husband, and did without realizing hasten with me, his loving mother, to lustful bed.” The Choragos comically replies: “And a whole profession was born, charging sometimes \$200 an hour,



and a 50 minute hour at that.” Jocasta continues, defending the urge to motherhood. The complete Chorus chants in response, parodying a stereotype of the Jewish mother: “Children grow up. They move out. Sometimes to ridiculous places like Cincinnati, or Boise, Idaho. Then you never see them again.”

*Mighty Aphrodite* does not just connect its narrative to *Oedipus Rex* for cheap jokes. One of the central thematic concerns of *Oedipus Rex* is whether it is better to always know Truth. The character who thinks it is, Oedipus, is brutally punished. *Oedipus Rex* is ultimately a detective story—a whodunit?—in which the detective comes to find that he himself is the culprit. The end of *Mighty Aphrodite* pursues its *Oedipus Rex* intertext not in the direction of such tragedy, but instead towards comedy, arguing that it is not always best to know Truth. Meeting at the F.A.O. Schwartz toy store, the two main protagonists, Lenny and Linda (Mira Sorvino), show off their babies. The film ends with Lenny not knowing that Linda’s child is his, and Linda not knowing that Lenny’s child is hers. The film thus converts *Oedipus Rex*’s tragic exploration of Oedipus’ mad quest for the Truth into a comedy about how what we do not know will not hurt us.

The Choragos is puzzled and disturbed by this outcome, so very different from the one that ends the *Oedipus Rex* with which he is familiar: “But they have each other’s child, and they don’t know.” The rest of the Chorus reassures him: “Yes, isn’t life ironic?” The Choragos is soon won over, celebrating the vicissitudes of life: “Life is unbelievable...miraculous...sad...wonderful.” The film ends with the Chorus leading a song, typical of ancient Greek comedy in its affirmation of the well-being of the social order as we take leave of the narrative. In this case, the song is a big-production show

tune, “When you’re smiling, the whole world smiles with you.” The mad quest for Truth in *Oedipus Rex* is forestalled in *Mighty Aphrodite*; the film radically reworks the plot such that the characters end happily, in blissful ignorance.

This reading of *Mighty Aphrodite* has demonstrated the power of such a method for illuminating a film in a new critical light. While *Mighty Aphrodite* is a late Woody Allen film in which the theatrical intertext is made explicit, indeed fully referential, prior Allen films rework theatrical material with significantly less fanfare. I propose that connecting *Annie Hall* to George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* will reveal this transitional film as a mediation on female subjectivity as controlled, and then liberated, from male intellectual control.

### ***Annie Hall* as an Intertextual Reworking of *Pygmalion***

Woody Allen explicitly wanted *Annie Hall* to be framed by the theatrical. As he says in his interview with Stig Bjorkman: “It’s important for the beginning and ending to have a special quality of some sort, a special theatrical quality, or something to arrest the audience immediately” (Qtd. in Cowie, 23). In fact, this theatrical progression from beginning to ending is in microcosm the development of Allen’s career from the theatrical to the cinematic, demarcated by *Annie Hall* as the turning point. Before *Annie Hall*, Allen wrote important plays and silly films; afterwards, he stopped writing plays, instead embracing the theatrical within these cinematic masterworks. *Annie Hall* is the first Allen film to use this gesture of the play-within-the-film.

The beginning of *Annie Hall* is a purely theatrical artifice, about a performer on a stage directly addressing the audience. This is of course the scene in which Woody

makes his jokes about “bad food, but such small portions” and about “not wanting to belong to a club who would have anyone like me as a member.” The ending of the film is similarly theatrically framed through the window of a restaurant. We see Annie crossing the street. Alvy turns and walks out of the frame, leaving a long take with just the city street left to look at. In voice-over, Alvie continues his joking, but now a dramatic theatrical referent—the break-up of their relationship—tinges the previous comedy. Now his joke is one of desperation: “we all need the eggs.”

Beyond this framing device, the theatrical in *Annie Hall* can also be traced via narrative structure: the film presents an implicit reworking of the Henry Higgins-Eliza Doolittle relationship in Shaw’s *Pygmalion*. Some critics have pointed to the general Shavian nature of Allen’s cinema. At first, critics compared Allen unfavorably to Shaw. In *Love, Sex, Death and the Meaning of Life*, Foster Hirsch argues: “If not exactly a comedy of ideas in the Shavian sense, *Love and Death* [1975] is nonetheless a comedy about ideas, and about intellect, in which Woody clearly respects as well as makes fun of the life of the mind. His mockery is in fact a form of tribute, perhaps the only kind that this professional skeptic and scoffer can handle” (77).

Peter Cowie is one of the few critics to explore the *Pygmalion* intertext in *Annie Hall*. Exploring the split-screen psychoanalysis scene, Cowie suggests that: “This also points to a Pygmalion and Galatea element in the relationship, as there has been in the real-life friendship between Woody Allen and Diane Keaton. Alvy longs to possess Annie, to shape her in his image.... The myth goes awry for Alvy because he cannot bring himself to marry his model and, like most latter-day Galateas, Annie eludes his clutches and transcends his sphere of influence.” (38). Woody Allen has described the

construction of this scene using the theatrical as an ideal: “I thought it was an interesting thing how two people report the same phenomenon differently. I thought the point was most theatrically made that way” (Qtd. in Bjorkman, 88).

The connection between *Annie Hall* and *Pygmalion* extends far more thoroughly than has been previously analyzed. First, the original title of *Annie Hall*, “Anhedonia,” meaning “an inability to enjoy,” is a precise way of understanding Henry Higgins’ problem as a rationalist scientist detached from his emotions. In keeping with the misanthropic tradition of the theatre, particularly via Moliere’s *The Misanthrope* (1666), Shaw depicts Higgins as an anhedonic monster. Early in the first act, Higgins suggests that those who speak improper English have no right to live because they are destroying the language of Shakespeare, and thus Shavian language. Upon first agreeing to see Eliza in his study, Higgins immediately wants to throw her out a window.

While not nearly so violent, perhaps an indication of the transformations produced by feminism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Alvy also refuses to enjoy himself, fixating instead on morbidity as he begins converting Annie Hall into a replication of himself. In the scene in the bookstore, he gives Annie two philosophical studies on the nature of death rather than “you know, that cat book.” When they are two minutes late to see *Face to Face* (1976), Alvy insists that they wait another two hours so that they do not miss the credits; Annie’s observation that said credits are in Swedish does not dissuade Alvy from his anhedonic position. Right before entering the theatre, Alvy had directed his misanthropy elsewhere: surrounded by “the cast of *The Godfather*,” Alvy asks for “the large polo mallet” so that he no longer has to meet his public.

Both *Annie Hall* and *Pygmalion* rely on a playful narration in order to force us to side initially with the male over the female central protagonists. Shaw stops Eliza's incomprehensible dialogue, telling us in a stage direction: "Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London" (101). *Annie Hall* is of course laden with such modernist narrational interventions. One such rupture similarly asks the audience to side with Alvy as a beleaguered party to verbal conversation. While discussing adult education in the kitchen, Annie gives voice to a Freudian slip, saying "my wife" instead of "my life." When she refuses to acknowledge her mistake, Alvy asks us in the audience to note the error, seeking out evidence that he is sane.

At the ideological level, both *Annie Hall* and *Pygmalion* fundamentally raise questions about social class and gender. Shaw, like the other Victorian satirist, Oscar Wilde, exposes the hollow nature of middle-class morality. When Mrs. Hill, at one of Higgins' mother's soirees, declares, "If people would only be frank and say what they really think," Higgins recoils in mock horror, "Lord forbid," echoing the Wildean satirical belief that soothing lies are better than harsh truths, stated most forcefully in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). *Annie Hall* is a similar satiric encounter with middle-class values. Like Higgins, Alvy bears the weight of the satire; he, for example, gets physically ill in the presence of the scion of middle-class values, the American television sit-com.

Furthermore, both *Pygmalion* and *Annie Hall* tell similar stories about the journey from the ethnic, working-class to a different location in the city wherein the protagonist is embraced by upwardly mobile society. In *Pygmalion*, Eliza makes the journey from her

small flat with a coin-operated heater to the luxurious rooms where Higgins trains her to be a lady. In *Annie Hall*, Alvy makes the journey from ethnic, working-class Brooklyn to Manhattan where he becomes a successful writer. That particular journey—from Brooklyn to Manhattan—would become the key class signifier in American cinema of the late 1970s. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner analyze a similar journey in *Saturday Night Fever* (1978): “[Ethnic Italian] Tony’s passage to Manhattan at the end is rendered cinematically in a highly metaphoric manner as a crucifixion and resurrection. He ‘dies’ to his dance life, descends into the subway hell, and is resurrected into a Manhattan sunrise” (114). In *Annie Hall*, Alvy shares a similar transformation with Annie by taking her to his former house under the Coney Island rollercoaster, quite a symbolic distance from their current world of upscale Manhattan nightclubs and art cinema movie houses.

Ultimately, the identity political issue that most allows *Pygmalion* to illuminate *Annie Hall* is gender. At its core, *Annie Hall* is a film about Alvy teaching Annie how to behave like an intellectual, giving her the skills to realize that he is not good enough for her. *Pygmalion* similarly reworked Ovid’s description of the myth of Pygmalion and Gallatea into a story of Eliza coming to consciousness that she would be better off marrying her suitor Freddy than continuing to put up with Higgins’ misogynistic abuse.

Such an intertextual gendered reading of *Annie Hall* explains what is otherwise the most perplexing scene in the film. Talking with a mounted policeman’s horse, Alvy admits to liking the Wicked Witch from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). This introduces a completely unexpected, and thoroughly unique, animated sequence in which a cartoon Alvy is subject to a scolding by Annie-cum-Wicked Witch. In similar fairy tale fashion, Shaw’s *Pygmalion* illuminates the Pygmalion-Gallatea roots of the Cinderella

myth, in which a young girl is transformed by her fairy godmother into the belle of the ball. At the ambassadors' party, where Higgins tests out his creation on the unsuspecting linguists, Shaw refers to Eliza as the "princess" (125). Later, in a complex reversal of the Cinderella myth, Higgins is the one who loses his slippers. Unlike the slipper that reconciles the prince charming to Cinderella, the slippers in *Pygmalion* in fact cause the final rift that sends Eliza into Freddy's arms, abandoning the abusive Higgins forever. Similarly, the Snow White scene, representing Alvy's vision of Annie as a nagging witch, predicts the ultimate demise of their relationship, as Annie comes to her senses and leaves Alvy's stultifying New York for Toney Lacey, the Los Angeles record executive.

## **Conclusion**

This paper's methodology has resulted in both a new reading of *Annie Hall* as a theatrically-influenced work, and also a reconsideration of how the theatre can be used to understand the cinema of Woody Allen more generally. In keeping with the thesis that the latter, post-Soon Yi scandal films are the most explicit about such intertextual relationships, the clearest *Pygmalion* reference in Woody Allen's oeuvre is to be found in *Deconstructing Harry* (1997). Thus, *Deconstructing Harry* can be seen in this light as a sort of post-Soon Yi scandal one-upping of the Pygmalion themes first presented in *Annie Hall*. Whereas the Pygmalion intertext in *Annie Hall* is implied, in *Deconstructing Harry* it is rendered explicit.

In this recent film, Harry Block (Woody Allen) is invited by his former girlfriend, Fay (Elisabeth Shue), for a drink so that she may tell him she is marrying his best friend Larry (Billy Crystal), who Harry believes, correctly, is the Devil. Whereas Henry

Higgins is rendered hysterical by Eliza's announcement that she is to marry Freddy, Harry Block is devastated to learn the news, and he finally declares that he loves her. In *Pygmalion*, Higgins can never bring himself to this declaration of love for Eliza; in *Deconstructing Harry*, this declaration comes too late. When Harry refuses to give the couple his blessing, because he wants to reconcile with her, a jump cut leads into Fay's analysis of the situation: "I was your pupil. It was Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle. That's what it was, and that's what you loved." Thus, unlike even Eliza before her, Fay has intertextual knowledge, building upon Eliza's life lessons, which Fay uses to analyze the present situation. Reminiscent of Alvy Singer's lectures on death and foreign films in *Annie Hall*, Fay contemptuously describes "those endless lectures on love in the Western world."

Harry, on the other hand, has made little progress over his misogynistic forebear. Much like Higgins' play-ending hysterical laughter, Harry is left to make crude, sarcastic jokes. After another shock cut, he whines: "[You were] another jerk fan. You know, that I would fuck you and then move on to the next fan. But... but it didn't happen that way. You know, you were a fan and... ahh... a follower and then a pupil and then... then you were a roommate and before I knew it you were the one who had control of the channel changer." Harry's stuttering delivery here indicates the way in which this supposedly great writer, appropriately named Block, has been far transcended in articulate and precise self-analysis by his former pupil. This process of reworking love relationships through the filter of Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle, first begun implicitly in *Annie Hall* finds its full fruition in the gender politics of *Deconstructing Harry*, as brutally self-loathing as any of the post-Soon Yi scandal Allen films.



Reading *Annie Hall* in this way as initiating Allen's life-long project of radically reworking *Pygmalion* is not to argue that this is the one true meaning of *Annie Hall*.<sup>v</sup> For example, others have read the film in similarly interesting ways. Nancy Pogel constructs the film as a screwball comedy, positioning it as a radical intertextual reworking of *Bringing Up Baby* (1938): "Initially, Annie is a crazy, humanizing antitoxin for Alvy's seriousness, and he plays a slow-moving, cautious straight-man to her disorderly, kinetic character, not unlike Cary Grant's anthropologist playing off Katherine Hepburn's flighty character in *Bringing Up Baby*" (90). Pogel suggests that *Annie Hall* thus becomes a self-conscious political film—a "reflexive, dialogic comedy [with] pathos" (96)—and thus critical of the conservatism of Hollywood: "Unqualified by Alvy's sort of skepticism and conscience, the atmosphere in Hollywood (where glib, resolved films are made) is politically dangerous. There people talk about Charlie Chaplin's problems with McCarthyism as 'his un-American thing'" (90).

Other such intertextual readings could also be imagined. For example, Pogel suggests the jail scene at the end of *Annie Hall* makes it resonate with the similar jail scene at the end of *Bringing Up Baby*. She notes, "In his original script, the film was to end with Alvy commenting on life from a jail cell in California" (96), but this ending might also suggest *The Catcher in the Rye* (1950), in which Holden also narrates from confinement, this time from a mental asylum. Such a reading is reinforced by the fact that, as Annie and Alvy divvy up books during their break-up, one of the key texts in dispute is Salinger's masterpiece.

Thomas Frank suggests *Annie Hall* is a form of cinema as criticism, using the example of the bookstore scene from earlier in the film: "Alvy literally shows the titles

[of the books on death, Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* and Jacques Choron's *Death and Western Thought*] to both Annie and the film-viewing audience. In so doing, Allen provides the sources (i.e., visual footnotes) for the beliefs that he is directing Annie and his audience towards" (87). In a similar way, Annie and Alvy divvying up their copies of *The Catcher in the Rye* provides a visual footnote to another reading of the film: narrated by a neurotic who turns out to be in prison (in the original planned ending), the film resonates with Salinger such that, as in *Pygmalion*, we come to value Annie's decision to abandon Alvy for a man with whom she can share *The Sorrow and the Pity* without having to endure Alvy's pompous lectures about its intellectual meaning. Like Eliza before her—"Freddy loves me: that makes him king enough for me. I don't want him to work: he wasn't brought up to it as I was. I'll go and be a teacher" (137)—Annie has found a relationship where she has skills and lessons to impart to her new partner.

Ultimately, this is the power of the radical intertextual criticism that I have mapped out in this essay. By studying the connection between *Annie Hall* and *Pygmalion*, a new reading of the film has been produced which allows us to see this most quintessentially 1970s film in a new light. But furthermore, it also allows us to rethink Allen's entire career. Contrary to spiteful post-Soon Yi scandal feminist assaults on Allen's character—for example, Marion Meade's assessment: "*Annie Hall* is not really about Annie, but about Alvy and his inability to relate to her or any other woman" (111)—such a reading reveals both an original engagement with questions of female liberation, as well as a development of such consciousness in films such as *Deconstructing Harry*. I cannot think of a greater testament to *Annie Hall* as a twenty-five-year old masterpiece of contemporary American cinema.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The tragic story of Oedipus' search for the truth about his natal origins has more indirectly haunted many Allen films, most humorously in his short film, "Oedipus Wrecks," part of *New York Stories* (1989).

<sup>ii</sup> Allen's published plays are: *Death Knocks* (1966), *Don't Drink the Water* (1966), *Play It Again, Sam* (1969), *Death* (1972), *God* (1972), *The Query* (1975), *The Floating Light Bulb* (1981), and *Central Park West* (1996).

<sup>iii</sup> Allen's previous directorial efforts—*Take the Money and Run* (1969), *Bananas* (1971), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (1972), *Sleeper* (1973), and *Love and Death* (1975)—all relied on very broad parody. This is in direct contrast with *Annie Hall*'s reliance on a self-reflexive interrogation of Allen's Jewish and masculine identities and their effects on his interpersonal relationships with women. These features, of course, are characteristics of the European art cinema, particularly the films of Ingmar Bergman. Significantly in this regard, Annie's lateness at the beginning of the film causes Alvy to miss a screening of Bergman's *Face to Face* (1976). Instead, they go to see *The Sorrow and the Pity*, a descriptor of not only the Nazi occupation of Paris, but of Allen's relationships within his films (and in his private life, for that matter).

<sup>iv</sup> I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dan Flory for first suggesting to me the relevance of *Pygmalion* to *Annie Hall*.

<sup>v</sup> Similarly, this is not to suggest that *Annie Hall* is the only contemporary film that reworks *Pygmalion*. For an intriguing parallel analysis of *Pygmalion* in recent film culture, see Laurie Grindstaff's superb analysis of *La Femme Nikita* (1990), "A Pygmalion Tale Retold."

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